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Morris Resigns in Harper's Dispute

By ALDEN WHITMAN

Willie Morris resigned unexpectedly yesterday as editor in chief of Harper's Magazine, a post the 36-year-old writer had held for the last four years.

Mr. Morris, in a statement last night, said he had quit in a dispute between "the money men and the literary men."

He added that "Prisoner of Sex," an article by Norman Mailer in the current issue dealing with the women's liberation movement, had also "deeply disturbed the magazine's owners. He said his resignation was "the saddest day in my life," adding that "I deeply loved the magazine."

The resignation was announced without explanation by the magazine at its offices 2 Park Avenue, after reports of it had circulated through the publishing world all day.

The announcement was issued in the name of John Cowles Jr. of Minneapolis, who is chairman of the Harper's Magazine Company as well as president of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company, of which the magazine concern is an operating division.

'Severe Disagreements'

In his statement Mr. Morris said:

"I am resigning because of severe disagreements with the business management over the purpose, the existence and the survival of Harper's Magazine as a vital institution in American life. My mandate as its eighth editor in 120 years has been to maintain its excellence and its courage. With the contribution of many of this country's finest writers, journalists, poets and critics, I think we have succeeded."

"It all boiled down to the money men and the literary men. And, as always, the money men won."

"The article in our current issue by Norman Mailer has deeply disturbed the magazine's owners. Mailer is a great writer. His work matters to our civilization."

"I have given eight years of my life, four of them as editor in chief, to help make Harper's true to its finest traditions. I leave Harper's with an honorable conscience. It is at its most

vital. It matters to the nation as it seldom has before. My resignation grieves my heart, but I am leaving as a protest against the calculated destruction of Harper's."

"All writers, editors and journalists who care passionately about the condition of the written in America should deplore with me the cavalier treatment by business management of America's oldest and most distinguished magazine. This is the saddest day of my life."

Elaborating on his statement in a telephone interview, Mr. Morris said that he had met with Mr. Cowles and others on the magazine's business side in Minneapolis two weeks ago. He said the management wanted to change the publication's concept "to a more specialized journal."

He said that the management wanted "to get rid of" David Halberstam, Larry King, John Corry, Marshall Prady and Lewis Lapham, who are among the magazine's contributing editors. He also said that the management wanted to trim the editorial budget because of the economic recession that has generally affected publishing.

There also were complaints, according to Mr. Morris, about Mr. Mailer's language—his article employs several Anglo-Saxonisms in its discussion of sex—and his treatment of sexual relationships. Mr. Mailer denied last night that his article was obscene. "The words I used were not obscene in their context," he contended.

And commenting on Mr. Morris's resignation, he called it "the most depressing event in American letters in many a year because Harper's had become the most adventurous of all magazines" under Mr. Morris.

In his dispute, Mr. Morris added, he had "very much in mind" William S. Blair, who is president and chief executive officer of Harper's Magazine Company and who works in its New York offices.

Mr. Morris said that as his perturbation grew on his return from Minneapolis he had written a letter of resignation



Willie Morris

last Monday to Mr. Cowles. It embodied, he said, the substance of his statement, and made his resignation effective March 15.

'No Internal Flap'

Mr. Blair said yesterday that he preferred not to go beyond Mr. Cowles's announcement of Mr. Morris's resignation. He insisted, however, that the step was "all a surprise to me." He added that there had been "no internal flap" over Mr. Mailer's article.

Reached in Minneapolis, Mr. Cowles denied that the magazine's content was a factor in his disagreement with Mr. Morris. He said that he had not finished Mr. Mailer's article, but that he thought it was "superb so far."

Asked if he were "grieved" by Mr. Morris's departure, Mr. Cowles said that "grieved" was a strong word. "A feeling of sadness" would be better, he said. "I have been fond of Willie personally for six years now," he went on. "I hate to see that association diminished."

From sources inside the magazine, it was learned that slipping circulation could have been an element in Morris-Cowles dispute. Mr. Blair said that said circulation was down 25,000 copies a month to a total of 300,000

copies currently. But he emphasized that advertising income was "about the same" as a year ago.

The circulation of The Atlantic, Harper's principal month competitor, is up, according to the N.W. Ayer Directory of Newspapers, Magazines and Trade Publications, standing at 325,000 copies a month last year as against 300,000 in 1968.

Staff Is Upset

Members of Harper's staff were visibly upset yesterday over Mr. Morris's resignation. "I really don't know if I'm quitting," said Mr. Halberstam, who won a Pulitzer Prize as a foreign correspondent for The New York Times and who joined Mr. Morris about five years ago. Mr. Corry, another contributing editor, said that he was remaining for "a while at least."

Other contributing editors could not be reached for comment.

Before coming to Harper's as an editor in 1963, Mr. Morris had made a reputation as a muckraking writer and editor in his native Texas. At the University of Texas, his scathing attacks, in the school newspaper, on the oil interests of state legislators perturbed a number of trustees. Later, as a writer for the weekly Texas Observer, he wrote about grafting politicians, the John Birch Society and discrimination against black and Mexican workers.

Changing the Image

At Harper's, Mr. Morris acted to change the writings of William Styron, the Pulitzer Prize novelist; Michael Harrington, the social critic and analyst of poverty; and Robert Coles, a social-issues psychiatrist.

In recent issues, Mr. Morris offered, among other articles, "Listening to America," by Bill D. Moyers, a former White House press secretary in the Johnson Administration.

In addition to editing the magazine, Mr. Morris was a frequent lecturer across the country. He also published "North Toward Home," autobiographical memoir.

What is now Harper's Magazine was founded in 1850 as Harper's New Monthly

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